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China: Defense Modernization Strategy for the 1980s

Beijing is making significant progress in its defense modernization program, a long-term effort aimed at gearing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for modern warfare. Military professionalism is being reinstituted and defense industries are developing new weapons for deployment over the next decade. Beijing is unlikely to modify its defense strategy significantly but is working to improve the integration of air, ground, and naval forces in joint service and combined arms operations. China will continue to rely for its conventional defense on a combination of terrain, manpower, and defense in-depth and to base its nuclear defense on a small, but--in Beijing's view--survivable nuclear deterrent. The size of the PLA should remain stable at around 4 million men, after the successful trimming of the PLA by 1 million men over the past three years.

The Soviet military buildup in the Far East is the underlying motivation for Beijing's defense modernization program.

Primarily in response to Soviet deployments in East Asia, we believe Beijing is setting the following agenda for improving its military capabilities:

- Nuclear Forces: Improve the deterrent to first strike by deploying additional ICBMs, building a small fleet of SSBNs, and beginning deployment of a solid-propellant IRBM by the late 1980s while working on a new solid-propellant ICBM for deployment in the mid-1990s.
- Ground and Air Forces: Augment conventional capabilities to defend land borders by beginning widespread deployment of antitank missiles, shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles, and armored personnel carriers for mechanized infantry.

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-- Naval Forces: Seek to become a regional Pacific naval power, by deploying three more nuclear attack submarines and producing a new class of high-speed frigate for ASW and air defense roles by the early 1990s.

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China's military establishment generally agrees on the modernization strategy but there are divergent views as to priorities and the role of imports in weapons modernization. The top leaders, with Defense Minister Zhang Aiping as the spokesman, are placing stringent restrictions on foreign weapons purchases and are seeking primarily Western production technology. Others, including senior commanders of the air force and navy, wish to procure some advanced weapons from abroad quickly to fill major gaps. We believe a policy of extremely selective weapons buys will prevail although pressure from the service arms for faster improvements will continue.

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Success in meeting military modernization objectives over the next decade will depend largely on the following factors:

- Success in higher priority programs to modernize agriculture, industry, and science and technology.
- The allocation of sufficient funds to finance the production of new weapons.
- The ability of the defense industries to modernize and to effectively assimilate foreign technology.
- The maintenance of domestic political stability.

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Beijing's improvements to its defense posture are unlikely to alter significantly the overall balance of forces in East Asia. New defensive weapons--if fielded in sufficient numbers--will considerably enhance China's capability to inflict heavy losses on any Soviet conventional invasion. Widely deployed antitank missiles will, for instance, provide the infantry a credible capability to defeat all models of Soviet tanks--with the possible exception of the few T-72s--now deployed in the Far East. The Soviets undoubtedly will improve their forces stationed along China's northern border and continue to hold an overwhelming advantage in offensive power.

China's expanding nuclear capabilities will increase its options for striking targets in the continental United States but, given its modest size--10 to 20 full-range ICBMs by the 1990s--the upgraded nuclear force will not present a significantly increased threat to the United States. Beijing will continue to seek assistance from the United States and other advanced nations in improving its conventional arsenal as many of the anticipated weapons developments depend heavily on the acquisition of advanced technology from the West.

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China is improving its amphibious assault capabilities through training,

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Beijing's intention is to create a small Marine Corps for contingencies such as an assault against the Spratly Islands and defense of its offshore islands.

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Weapons enhancements will improve capabilities against weapons currently in Taiwan's and Vietnam's inventories. New fighters, frigates, and armored vehicles, when deployed in the 1990s, will give China a qualitative advantage over its southern adversaries. Vietnam, in particular, may find its recently augmented northern border defenses jeopardized.

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